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Reviews: Suburban Warriors - The origins of the New American Right; The Book of Jerry Falwell - fundamentalist language and politics; Blinded by the Right - the conscience of an ex-conservative

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Hall has developed a different interpretation of the sixties from that found in most American books on the subject. He has explored the interface between African-American culture, citizenship and modernity. His aim in doing this was to suggest that typical descriptions of events or thought in the sixties, such as radical, liberal, or conservative are not necessarily the best terms. Rather, African-Americans were engaged in a much more complex negotiation of the past and the present.

Sixties scholarship has for a long time been divided between conservatives for whom the sixties pointed to social disruption and moral decline and those who saw in the changes of the sixties youthful enthusiasm for the regeneration of America. Hall's book belongs to a new generation of scholarship which extricates itself from the fetters of participation and partisanship and instead looks for what else might be happening. In that sense alone, *Mercy, mercy me* is an important deviation from the norm and an indicator of the direction future scholarship must take.

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Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right. By Lisa McGirr. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2001, pp xiii+ 395, US$20.95 (paper).

The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics. By Susan Friend Harding. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, pp. xvi + 336, 2000,US$20.95 (paper).

Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative. By David Brock. Crown Publishing, New York, 2002, pp.352, $US25.95 (cloth).

The triumph of a neoliberal economic doctrine in America has been accompanied by, indeed partly propelled by, a conservative social and moral agenda. The paradox is this – as neoliberalism cuts its swathe through tradition, remaking the social order out of the ruins of a New Deal consensus, it removes the material conditions that can sustain social and moral conservatism. Thus it is that the Supreme Court recently upheld the doctrine of privacy in *Lawrence vs. Texas* and effectively challenged state laws banning sodomy. In a dissenting decision, Justice Antonin Scalia warned that the Court had taken the wrong side in the "culture war". What Scalia failed to realize was that the culture war (or a significant part of it) becomes significant now only when it suits the architects of economic

policy. For a period, it was central to the battle for the hearts and minds of middle America. Yet, as new right ideologues recognized, no amount of preaching the virtues of supply side economics would convert small town and suburban America. Best conjoin economic fundamentalism with moral fundamentalism. Issues like abortion, homosexuality and pornography were used adeptly to hitch ordinary Americans to the frontier wagon of neoliberal economics. The Moral Majority and then the Christian Coalition provided the backbone of the right wing Republican revolution nationally.

Prior to the 1970s, however, a movement in California which precursed the new right was taking shape. This movement's mission was to place the Republican party firmly on the right, along the way rehabilitating political positions once pushed (or so it seemed) to the margins. Orange County in Los Angeles became a seedbed of the mounting reaction to Sixties left liberalism. This provided a neat mirror to the early Sixties when, a few hundred miles to the north, the San Francisco Bay Area was the seedbed for a new radicalism. Part of the full story of the Sixties is, indeed, a tale of two cities – one steeped in a radical labour heritage, the other (despite elements of left-liberalism in Hollywood) an enclave of open-shop conservatism, particularly Christian moral conservatism. The differences became more marked in the post-war period as new industries, specifically revolving around defence and electronics, moved to Los Angeles and Orange County became something of a suburban outpost of the Midwest. What happened in the post-war period and became entrenched after the early 60s was a power shift (to use Kirkpatrick Sale's term), a shift from old manufacturing to new, a shift which registered geographically as one from the northeast to the southern rim. And it registered politically in a number of ways, the most startling of which was a Southern reconciliation with the Republican Party. Yet, perhaps even more significantly, this shift helped push Ronald Reagan into the California Governorship and subsequently the Presidency.

In *Suburban Warriors*, Lisa McGirr very effectively charts the rise of right-wing grass roots campaigners and campaigns in Orange County during the Sixties. Her contribution to regional history is vital and engaging. It does, perhaps, claim more than it achieves. The subtitle, 'the origins of the new American right' reflects national implications which are not treated in a thorough way. Thus you can search in vain for discussion of some of the major players in the formation and development of the new right. To be fair, McGirr does acknowledge limitations and her book is a kind of pre-history. Nonetheless, occasional local history minutiae remain just that.

So, too, there is something missing from Susan Friend Harding's *The Book of Jerry Falwell*. At times this study is an engrossing foray into that world of moral fundamentalism centred on the Reverend Jerry Falwell. It is also a

book about the rise of a fundamentalist-fuelled politics and thus about a new stage in American political history. Harding argues that a clear separation of church and state has been whittled down by merchants of the soul. For her, the triumph of a secular modernity was crystallized in the Scopes trial: 'The Scopes trial was the first "cultural workshop" that produced the social contract which exiled conservative -- in the sense of Bible-believing and Christ -professing – Protestants from the nation's public life...' Following the high drama of that trial, 'Fundamentalists figured as stigmatized outsiders' in the accounts of the nation's chroniclers, from academics to movie directors. All this was to change, however, by the 1980s when tele-evangelism became a potent force in American life.

This rehabilitation of fundamentalism, if that is really what it is, marks a significant shift in political culture, a shift created by Falwell and other preachers who had the ears of both government and large sections of the population. Yet possibly Harding overstates the degree to which such fundamentalism was excluded from public life and thus the impact which the new fundamentalism had. Attacks on 'Godless Communism' were hardly a marginal feature of American political life following the Scopes trial. The ideology might not have been pushed by charismatic preachers with a penchant for publicity but it was still present and accounted for. Indeed, both Harding and McGirr exaggerate the degree to which political and religious fundamentalism have been historically on the fringes of American political culture. Far from exceptionalist, they do speak to core American values and prejudices. It is not only overdrawn claims of the entirely new which weaken Harding's book but also a tendency towards dogged and dull exegesis. There is just so much of interest in Falwell's narrative (and religious fundamentalism overall). The rest is scholarly ornament and, as such, impresses for a while only to leave the reader aching for something more substantial.

While both Harding and, in particular, McGirr offer sometimes important and interesting insights into the political and religious soul of the new right, their accounts need supplementing by a more contemporary picture. This is provided by David Brock's *Blinded by the Right : The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative.* Brock has blown the lid on the machinations of the new right ideologues who control current Republican politics. He is a reformed insider who reveals the visceral hatreds, lascivious rumour-mongering and downright bastardry of that cabal around William Kristol and Norman Podhoretz and Ken Starr and Clarence Thomas (to name but a few). Yes, Hilary, there really was a vast right-wing conspiracy against your husband and Brock, in the early days, was part of it. The conspiracy pretended to governed by morals. Thus Jerry Falwell, in a sense, was the godfather. The real agenda, however, was the entrenchment of right-wing corporate power

and privilege nationally and internationally. Absolutist morality was a cloak. Both open and closeted gays, like Brock himself, supported the agenda. Brock imagines he was so blinded by the right that he tried to bury his authentic self and sexuality. How could he, after all, give succour to those fundamentalist preachers who labelled his lifestyle a gross deviation? A careful reading of the book, however, suggests, that his sexuality was no threat at all to the new right establishment (just as Clinton's sexual rapaciousness was no threat but his environmentally protective Executive Orders were). The moral sermonizing provided a convenient cover to those whose campaigns were directed more at the political and economic realms. Future studies of the new right will need to investigate more closely the way in which social issues were exploited by a monied elite concerned to refashion political priorities.

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Presidential Decisions for War: Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf. By Gary R. Hess, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 2001, pp. xiv + 262.

Presidential decision-making is a central concern of the vast literature on post-1945 US foreign policy. Gary R. Hess has drawn on this body of scholarship in order to evaluate the leadership of Presidents Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson and George Bush in the three limited wars in which the United States was directly involved between 1945 and the end of the twentieth century, in Korea, Vietnam and the Persian Gulf. He does so within a clear structure: for each president he examines the decision for war in one chapter, the president's performance as commander in chief in another.

Hess emphasises similarities between the three presidential decisions for war. Truman, Johnson and Bush were all concerned about the effects of acts of 'aggression' on international order and US 'credibility'. South Korea, South Vietnam and Kuwait were not themselves regarded as vital US interests, but it was feared that unwillingness to take military action in support of these states would embolden America's enemies, undermine the confidence of its friends, and erode the international relationships on which US security was based. All three presidents were heavily influenced also by the 'lessons' of history. The experience of the 1930s, when the Western democracies failed to deal effectively with German, Italian and Japanese expansionism, underlined the costs of 'appeasement' and exerted a major influence on Truman and Johnson during the Cold War and even on Bush as